

DESCRIPTIVE NOTE ON AN OUTRIGGER CANOE FROM THE WAKDE ISLANDS, NORTH COAST IRIAN JAYA

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ABSTRACT

A five-part single outrigger canoe from the Wakde or Arimoa Islands off the north coast of Irian Jaya and now held in the Oceanic collections of the Northern Territory Museum of Arts and Sciences, Darwin, Australia, is described, illustrated and compared with other documented examples.

KEYWORDS: Outrigger canoe, Wadke Islands, Sobei, Irian Jaya, Northern Territory Museum of Arts and Sciences.

This five-part single outrigger canoe (Fig. 1), capable of carrying one or two people, was collected from Wakde by Dr G.J.M. Gerrits in 1962 and is now in the Oceanic Collection of the Northern Territory Museum of Arts and Sciences in Darwin (Registration number NGE 1515).

Pulau Pulau Wakde is an island pair at 1°56'N 139°01'E and part of three groups of tiny islands, often termed the Arimoa Islands, off the north coast of Irian Jaya. Abel Tasman in 1643 referred to them as Moa, Gamna and neighbouring islands. Today some of the islands are also known as the Koemamba and Podena Islands. Wakde is the western-most of the central group of islands close to the coast. The people inhabiting these three groups of islands, as well as

two tracts of mainland coast around the villages of Sarmi and Ahus, speak dialects of the Sobci language, one of a number of Austronesian languages that occur along the northern coasts of Irian Jaya and Papua New Guinea.

Including the outrigger and attachments, the canoe is 390 cm long and 218 cm wide. The height of the canoe measures 41 cm to the top of the washstrakes, where the beam is 16 cm. The canoe appears to have been constructed on the proportional $\frac{1}{3}$ principle: measurements between bow and outrigger boom, between booms, and from boom to stern are equidistant.

Details, including local names for parts of small outrigger canoes, were collected by Dr Gerrits from Jamna Island, 25 km to the east

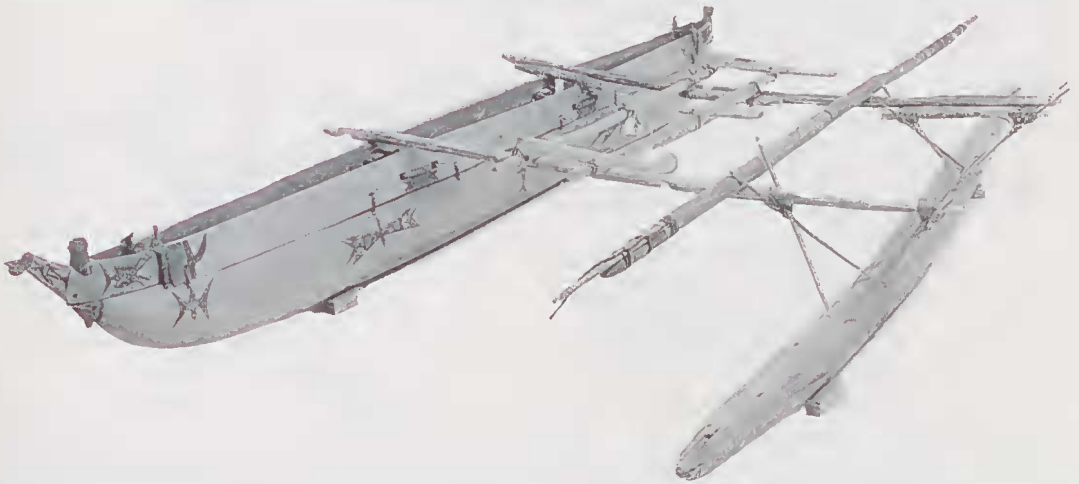


Fig. 1. Stern view of Wakde canoe, NGE 1515, in pre-reconstructed state. A fishing spear from the region is resting across the booms.

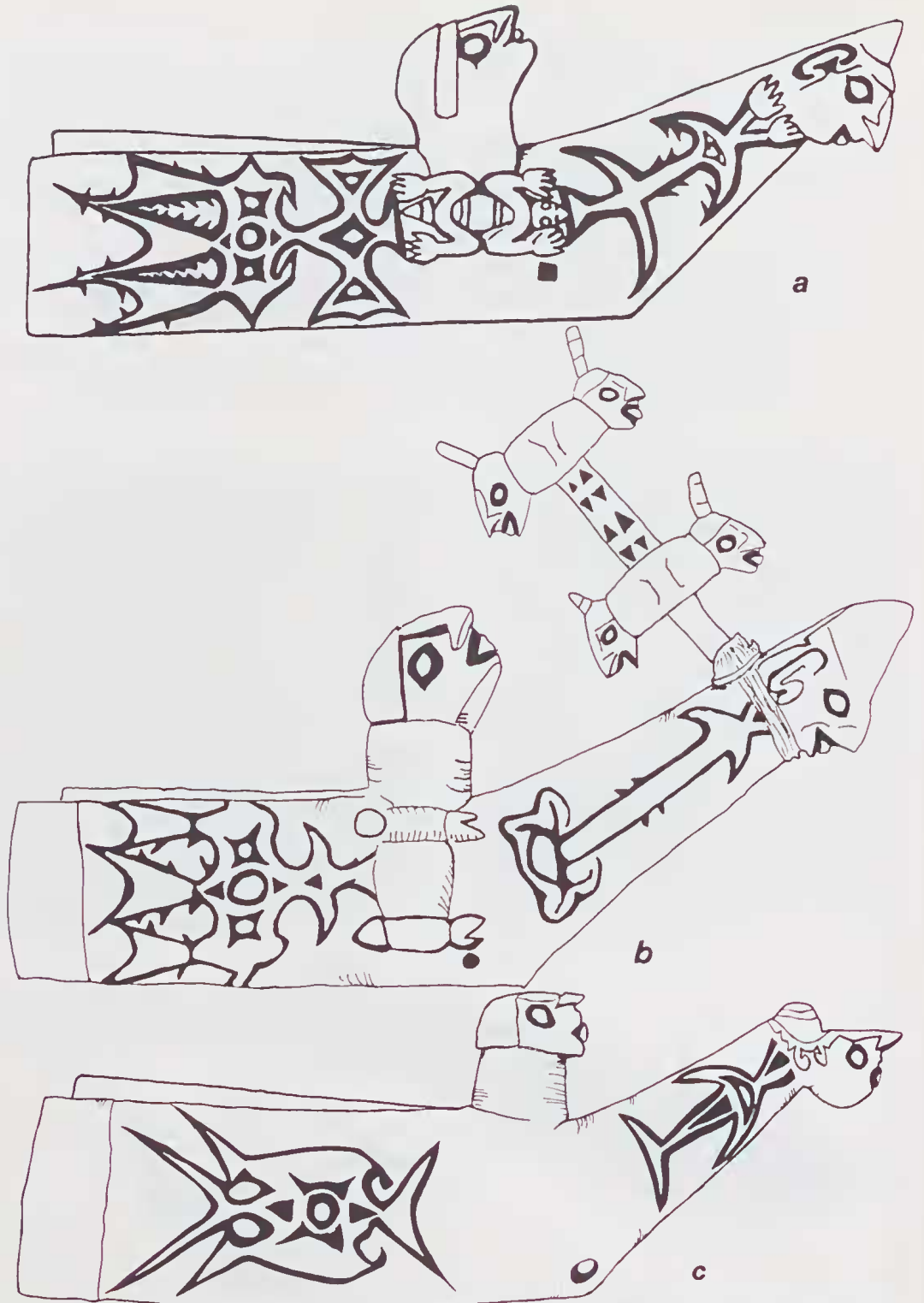


Fig. 2. a, aft end-piece in the Cambridge Museum attributed to Arimoa Islands (sketched slightly modified from that illustrated in Haddon and Hornell 1937 (II) :317); b, aft end-piece together with attached four-headed ornament, now in the Naturhistorisches Museum in Vienna (sketch derived from photograph in Führmann 1922: Pl.24); c, aft end-piece from NGE 1515.

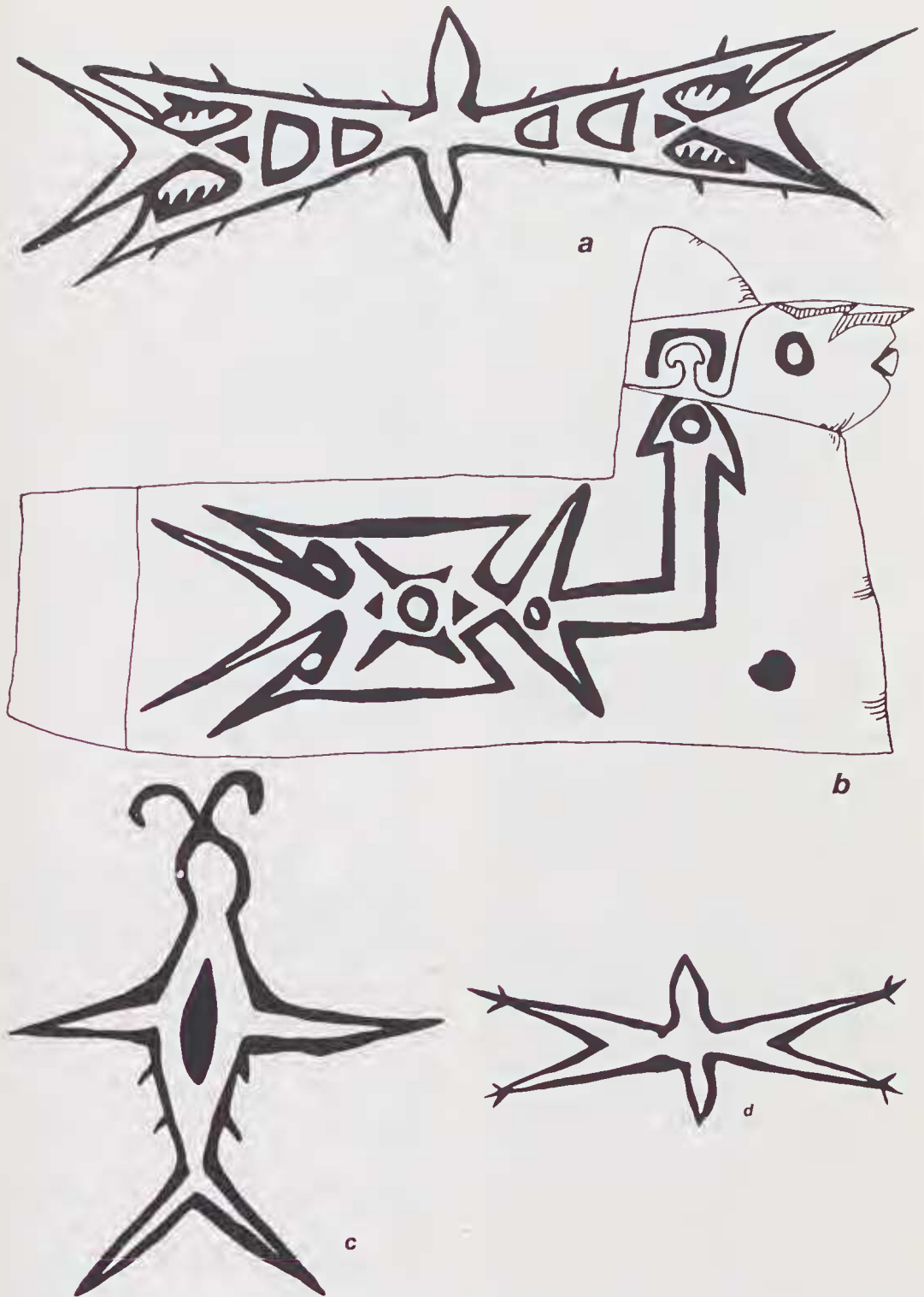


Fig. 3. a, double fish engraving with red and black colouring on NGE 1515, from near stern on outrigger side of hull; b, prow end-piece from NGE 1515, which has red and black colouring not shown on the sketch; c, flying fish design in centre offside hull of NGE 1515; d, engraved design on offside just aft of the prow of NGE 1515.

of Wakde. The people of Jamna speak a dialect of Sobei closely related to that of Wakde. From this record the hull is named *io*, the washstrakes *babo*, the outrigger float *samo*, the outrigger boom *keida*. The boom stringers *aftebir* together with the spear carriers *kajanja* form a railing to transport luggage, fish, paddle and fishing spear. Rope made of rattan is termed *wrairioe*.

By comparison with earlier illustrations of parts from other Wakde canoes, such as the unprovenanced elaborate aft end-piece in the Cambridge Museum attributed to the Arimoa Islands (Fig. 2a), and a further example complete with attached four-headed ornament now in the Naturhistorisches Museum in Vienna (Fig. 2b), we can clearly see that the canoe under discussion is from a conservative tradition. Conservatism amongst seafaring peoples is not unusual, particularly in Melanesia.

Hornell recorded the following with reference to the small canoes from Wakde:

"the prow is carved into the form of a human head much conventionalized and quite small....." (1923:70)

"The stern piece differs peculiarly from that at the fore end, for in addition to a terminal point carved into a very rude convention of a human head or at least into a projection showing a nose and eyes, there is immediately inwards an upwardly projecting parrot's head, stumpy and conventional Between these is tied a quadrangular arrangement of four human heads with the top of the nose extravagantly elongated....." (1923:71).

From the extant museum examples it would seem that rather than the projecting parrot's head described by Haddon on the aft end-piece, the more usual form is a protruding human head (Fig. 2a, b, c).

The most immediately noticeable difference between the aft end-piece of the canoe collected by Gerrits in 1962 and that of the earlier examples, is there is no provision for the attached four-headed ornament. Instead the neck terminates in a ridge.

From here, differences between the earlier and later end-pieces are matters of reduction rather than omission. The animal figure underneath the vertical head in the Cambridge aft end-piece forms an independent quadruped complete with head, one for each side of the end-piece. In the Vienna example the position of the quadruped changes to the vertical, utilizing the protruding head as its own. In the Northern Territory example the quadruped is reduced still further to one pair of barely recognizable leg stumps on each side of the base of the neck of the protruding head.

A further interesting variation in the Northern Territory example is the upturning and thrusting forward of the human head representation at the tip of the aft end-piece. The flying fish images engraved into the side of the aft end-piece and along the body of the canoe (Fig. 3), have undergone less simplification than has the quadruped. The images are less ornate, but the distinctive style of the region is still retained.

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